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An Issue of Authority: Robert Hart, Gustav Detring and the Large Dragon Stamp

Emma Reisz¹

Abstract

When the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs opened a limited daily postal service to the general public in 1878, it issued the first postage stamps produced by the Chinese government. As well as a means of payment, these postage stamps were visual and tangible representations of the issuing authority. Not previously considered in detail by historians, the first Customs Post issue precipitated a struggle for control among the foreign officials of the Maritime Customs which arose from significant disagreements over both communications and globalisation in China. Robert Hart and James Campbell sought to use the new postal service to situate China within Western-dominated global norms of governance and administration, while Gustav Detring's focus was on expansion of Chinese communication networks. These conflicting objectives spilled into disagreements over the design of the first stamp, which were eventually resolved by the Large Dragons. The stamp dispute initiated deep divisions over authority within the Maritime Customs as Detring's relationship with Hart deteriorated, and Detring's role as Li Hongzhang's advisor expanded. The episode also illustrates the diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches to Chinese reform among Westerners in the late Qing, and their complex alignments with Chinese authorities and Western interests.

Keywords

Qing postal system, Imperial Maritime Customs, Robert Hart, Gustav Detring, Large Dragon stamp, globalisation

Hart and the Large Dragons

On 4 July 1877, a telegram was sent from London to China for the attention of Robert Hart, Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs. Hart had been known to chide subordinates for profligate use of the telegraph, but the sender was adamant that 'a few telegrams are not to be grudged' to prevent expensive mistakes.² The telegram was sent by Hart's London agent, James Duncan Campbell, and he considered the matter sufficiently urgent to disturb Hart during his tour of China's treaty ports in the summer of 1877. The topic of Campbell's frantic trans-global communication was the design and production of China's first Customs stamp.

Postal requisition impracticable. Machine Paper Ink all unsuitable... Special experience required Time expense saved & protection from forgery ensured by starting manufacture here transferring to China afterwards.³

Campbell was one of the earliest people to appreciate the importance of the design of the first postage stamp issued by a part of the Chinese government, but he was certainly not the last. One hundred and forty years later, interest in the first Customs stamp remains high. The essays which were the subject of Campbell's telegram - and which were never made into a stamp - sold in 2017 by the Interasia

¹ I am grateful to Aglaia De Angeli and to Special Collections and Archives at Queen's University Belfast. Clare Morrison provided research assistance.

² Campbell to Hart, 28 Dec. 1877, no. 410 in *Archives of China's Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential, Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell, 1874-1907*, ed. by Xiafei Chen and Jung-jang Han, 4 vols (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), vol. I, p. 332.

³ Telegram, Campbell to Hart [no. 171], 4 July 1877, no. 305 in Chen and Han, vol. III, pp. 1058-59.

auction house for over HK\$2m.⁴

The early Customs Post and the Large Dragon stamps of 1878 offer a window onto the intersecting struggles for national, imperial and global control in late Qing China. The establishment of a limited public postal service under the Maritime Customs from 1878 was one of several incremental steps towards the realisation of one of Robert Hart's long-standing aspirations: the evolution of the Customs Post in 1896 into the Imperial Post, a national postal service subordinate to Hart.⁵ The issuance of a postage stamp in 1878 was an important element of Hart's plan.⁶ The new stamps were themselves a message, symbolising Hart's aspirations for both the Customs and for China itself. Modelled on the system developed in early Victorian Britain, postage stamps were a tangible representation of the Customs' approach to a postal service. The sender was to pay all the costs at standardised postage rates, and the service was to be open to all without a subscription or an account. The stamps were also a visual representation of the Qing state, and questions of design and production were symbolic as well as practical.

Despite the importance of the Customs Post, it has received relatively little in-depth scholarly consideration. Early accounts of the Chinese Post Office made only brief references to Customs Post.⁷ Even Stanley Wright's monumental treatment of Hart and the Maritime Customs emphasises the establishment of the Imperial Post in 1896 over the preceding Customs Post period.⁸ Cheng Ying-wan got to the heart of Hart's Customs Post problem in her 1970 study of Chinese postal services in the later nineteenth-century, noting that 'from the beginning Hart stressed strict economy' and expected the Customs Post to be run without a subsidy and without any reallocation of senior staff. Cheng concluded of the Customs Post that it was 'regular and convenient [and]... successful', but the early Customs Post at times struggled on all three fronts.⁹ Tsai Weipin uses postal routes between Beijing and Zhejiang in the winter of 1878/79 to illuminate the difficulties the Customs Post had when dealing with territorial authorities, noting that 'the winter postal service did not enjoy a particularly collaborative relationship with the provincial generals'.¹⁰ The issuance of the first Customs postage stamps has attracted even less attention from historians.¹¹ The Large Dragons have, naturally, interested philatelists, notably Philip Ireland in 1978.¹² Philatelic discussion of the stamps has, though, often been circumscribed by what Robert Bickers has called the 'cult of Hart', whereas the Large Dragons should be seen also in the context of the challenges to Hart's authority, as well as

⁴ 'Interasia Auctions Ltd.: Prices Realized', 2017 <<http://www.interasia-auctions.com/cgi-bin/prs.php?sale=56>> [accessed 7 May 2018].

⁵ On the establishment of a national postal service, see Cheng Ying-wan, *Postal Communication in China and its Modernization, 1860-1896* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1970); On the role of the Imperial Post, see Weipin Tsai, 'The Qing Empire's Last Flowering: The Expansion of China's Post Office at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 49.03 (2015), 895–930 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X15000013>>.

⁶ On the Customs Post from 1878, see Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice: The Establishment of Overland Winter Postal Routes in the Late Qing China', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47.6 (2013), 1749–81 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X13000012>>.

⁷ H. Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office: An Historical Survey of the Quarter-Century 1896-1921', in *Report on the Chinese Post Office: For the Tenth Year of Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921)* (Shanghai: Supply Dept. of the Directorate General of Posts, 1922), pp. 1–16 (pp. 6–8); Reprinted as H. Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office: An Historical Survey of the Quarter-Century 1896-1921 (1922)', in *Despatches, Letters, Memoranda, Etc. Index*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service, vol. 7 (Shanghai: Statistical Dept. of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1937), pp. 276–94. Chia-hua Chu, *China's Postal and Other Communications Services* (Shanghai, China: China United Press, 1937), p. 5.

⁸ The Customs Post is discussed in Stanley Fowler Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs* (Belfast: W. Mullan, 1950), pp. 5–6, 316–17.

⁹ Cheng Ying-wan, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁰ Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1751.

¹¹ The Dragon stamps are touched on by Cheng Ying-wan, p. 74.

¹² Philip Willard Ireland, *China: The Large Dragons, 1878-1885* (London: Ro. Lowe, 1978). Other useful philatelic works include Percival David, 'Sketches, Essays and Proofs of China's First Issue', *London Philatelist*, March 1949; Robert C. H. Lee, 'China, the First Issue [in Three Parts]', *The Collectors Club Philatelist*, September 1952; Jeffrey Schneider, 'A Census of the Customs Post Markings in the Pre-Philatelic Period', *Journal of China Philately*, 3 (2008), 245–61.

to the authority of the Customs and of the Chinese state itself.¹³ Indeed, the use of visual material by the Customs to shape perceptions of China and the Chinese government has been largely neglected by scholars.¹⁴ The stamps were, this essay suggests, a tiny portable illustration of how the Customs thought China should be understood by the wider world.

Globalisation and authority in late Qing China

Recent scholarship has found globalisation to be an illuminating perspective from which to consider late Qing history.¹⁵ The adoption of Western infrastructure 'facilitated the physical incorporation of China into wider networks and circuits as well as its alignment with developing international norms', as Robert Bickers argues.¹⁶ Globalisation is not a neutral or uncomplicated phenomenon of interconnectedness; rather, global rules and linkages can be understood as a space into which power can be projected, by states and others, and through which power can be exercised. From this perspective, the expansion of the postal service operated by the Imperial Maritime Customs was not merely a step in the incorporation of China into global postal networks, but was also a battleground in a wider tussle among the major powers to wield influence over the shape of globalisation. Rather than inserting late Qing history into a framework of *either* globalisation *or* imperialism, the global networks established in this period illuminate the struggle for influence between and within the foreign powers and the Chinese state.

The Customs Post is a prominent vantage point from which to consider debates over globalisation in China in the late Qing period. The Imperial Maritime Customs was global, imperial and Chinese all at once: a chimera mandated by British treaty. The 1858 Treaty of Tianjin which Britain extracted during the Second Opium War committed China to a significant expansion of foreign trade, but left the details vague.¹⁷ In the following months, British, French and American negotiators concluded the 'Agreement containing Rules of Trade' of 8 November 1858, detailing how the Treaty of Tianjin should be implemented. Rule X required a

uniform system [of Customs]... at every port. The High Officer appointed by the Chinese government to superintend foreign trade... will be at liberty... to select any [British] subject he may see fit to aid him in the administration of the Customs revenue.¹⁸

This led to the creation of a foreign-staffed body - briefly British alone, then international - to administer the taxation of China's international trade. The Maritime Customs absorbed and expanded upon the foreign-controlled customs administration which had been established at Shanghai in 1854, reproducing the system across China's other treaty ports. The Rules of Trade brought the Maritime Customs into the Qing state, unlike its Shanghai predecessor, though this control was rarely felt in day-to-day administration.¹⁹ A comparatively rare example of Chinese official intervention in routine Maritime Customs activity came not from the Yamen itself but from Li Hongzhang, the powerful

¹³ Robert Bickers, 'Anglo-Japanese Relations and Treaty Port China: The Case of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service', in *The International History of East Asia, 1900–1968: Trade, Ideology and the Quest for Order*, ed. by Antony Best (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 49; See e.g. Ireland, chap. 1 pt 2.

¹⁴ There is a brief discussion of postal visualities at Weipin Tsai, 'The Qing Empire's Last Flowering', pp. 916–18.

¹⁵ Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999); Lydia He Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rudolf Wagner, *Joining the Global Public Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Robert Bickers, 'Infrastructural Globalization: Lighting the China Coast, 1860s–1930s', *The Historical Journal*, 56.2 (2013), 431–458 (p. 433) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X13000010>>.

¹⁷ Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1910), vol. II, p. 31.

¹⁸ William Frederick Mayers, *Treaties between the Empire of China and Foreign Powers, Together with Regulations for the Conduct of Foreign Trade, &c. &c. &c.* (Shanghai: J. Broadhurst Tootal, 1877), pp. 30–31.

¹⁹ Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, pp. 133–34.

Viceroy of Zhili, who in 1884 demanded Hart send Gustav Detring, a Customs Commissioner and close adviser of Li, from Guangzhou back to Tianjin.²⁰ Such incidents were the exception, however.

The Maritime Customs certainly had 'a significant part in representing British and other foreign interests in China'.²¹ Though an arm of the Chinese government, the foreign-dominated Maritime Customs was committed by both practice and treaty to promoting China's global trade. Hart instructed his staff that the duties of the Customs included ensuring that trade was 'as much facilitated, and as little fettered, as possible', but he reminded them that this was to ensure that 'the coffers of the [Qing] revenue are most rapidly filled'.²² When foreigners had the ear of governments, disagreements between them could be very significant indeed. Hans van de Ven has said of Hart and the increasingly powerful Tianjin Commissioner, Detring, that they were at the end of the century 'both constituents of an international network of entrepreneurs, statesmen, journalists, and diplomats... [who] represented different strains in it. Hart stood for the ideals of liberal progress... oriented toward the world of the British empire... Detring was connected to Germany... [and] was inspired by visions of new global entrepreneurship'.²³ One Inspector-General, Frederick Maze, went so far as to describe the Maritime Customs as 'an outpost of the British empire'.²⁴ Divergences between foreigners were not always on national lines; one of the most important disagreements among foreigners regarding Chinese postal services was between Hart and another Briton, Thomas Wade. British officials, on the other hand, sometimes considered Robert Hart in particular to be undermining the British position rather than strengthening it.

Customs postal services developed with the support of parts of the Chinese government, but there was no consensus before 1896 among either Chinese officials or foreign powers about the best way to proceed. Expansion of Customs postal services was energetically opposed by those - both Chinese and foreign - who objected to the potential displacement of China's patchwork of existing postal services, or who considered that a public, national postal service was not an appropriate undertaking for the imperial government.²⁵ A major brake on the development of a government postal service, generally overlooked by scholars, was a fear shared by Westerners and foreigners about the amount of influence which anyone heading a national postal service would be able to exercise. Such a large bureaucracy would have political gravity, not to mention the direct control it would exercise over the flow of commercial, political and personal information. Early Chinese postal services can be understood as either subverting or supporting Western pressure on the Chinese state. For Tsai Weipin, the social purpose of the Post was incompatible with the objectives of the Maritime Customs, since the Post was there 'to serve the whole of the Chinese population rather than just those individuals, companies, and officials concerned with foreign trade'.²⁶ Conversely Lane Harris argues that Hart's preoccupation with the Post arose from a fundamental misunderstanding of Qing governance and his efforts to Westernise it.²⁷ Hart complained in 1896 that:

²⁰ Hart to Campbell 27 Apr. 1884, no. 477 in *The I. G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907*, ed. by John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner, and Elizabeth MacLeod Matheson, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), vol. I, p. 541.

²¹ Donna Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1949* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9.

²² Robert Hart, 'The Customs Service, the Spirit That Ought to Animate It, the Policy That Ought to Guide It, the Duties It Ought to Perform; General Considerations and Special Rules (21 June 1864), Circular No. 8 of 1864, 1st Ser.', in *Inspector General's Circulars, 1861 to 1892*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 1, pp. 36-47 (p. 41).

²³ Hans van de Ven, 'Robert Hart and Gustav Detring during the Boxer Rebellion', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40.3 (2006), 631-62 (pp. 660-61).

²⁴ Nicholas R. Clifford, 'Sir Frederick Maze and the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1937-1941', *The Journal of Modern History*, 37.1 (1965), 18-34 (p. 20) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/239562>>.

²⁵ Cheng Ying-wan, p. 85ff.

²⁶ Weipin Tsai, 'The Qing Empire's Last Flowering', p. 898; See also Tsai Weipin, 'Jiaotong, Youzheng Yu Jindai Zhongguo Shehui Biandong 交通、邮政与近代中国社会变动 [Transportation, Postal Service and Social Change in Modern China]', *史学月刊 (Journal of Historical Science)*, 8.1 (2016), 10-13.

²⁷ Lane Jeremy Harris, 'The Post Office and State Formation in Modern China, 1896-1949' (unpublished Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), p. 13.

the [Sino-Japanese] negotiation does not progress... The Government of China is a puzzle... There is a Govt. and it continually is felt, but it's more of an atmosphere than a body and there's no locating it for grappling purposes.²⁸

The disagreements within the Maritime Customs between 1876 and 1878 over the production of the Customs stamp can be understood, as this essay argues, alongside wider questions of Chinese reform, with Hart on one side, and Detring and Li Hongzhang on the other. While Detring was focused on tangible infrastructure, Hart's focus was on using institutions such as a postal service to position China within Western norms of the state. In Hart's view, the complexity of the Qing state impeded China's international relations. By creating structures within the Chinese state which foreigners could recognise and comprehend, Hart believed that China could strengthen its international position without the premature unravelling of Chinese practices of governance. Hart himself spent the bulk of his career in just such a structure: in some respects, his Maritime Customs resembled an offshoot of the British civil service transplanted into the Chinese government. In line with Hart's preoccupation with structures and bureaucracies, he argued for China to establish foreign diplomatic missions and to seek to use international law to its benefit.²⁹

More broadly, Hart and the Customs had a central role in China's integration into what Robert Bickers calls the 'global encyclopaedia': the compendium of knowledge controlled by Westerners and built on Western global networks.³⁰ By representing China globally, the Customs had an opportunity to shape how China was perceived. A national postal service was for Hart as much about shaping how the Chinese state was perceived by outsiders as it was about changing China. The Customs coordinated the Chinese presence at numerous international exhibitions in this period, including Paris in 1878, the same year as the stamp. Through postage stamps on letters arriving in foreign offices and homes, just as through exhibitions, Hart could directly influence how China was seen in the West.³¹ Much of the 'branding' later adopted for the Imperial Post after 1896 had its origins in the Customs Post of 1878.³²

Early Customs postal services

The involvement of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs in the postal service was not out of the ordinary for what had always been understood as far more than simply a taxation collection agency. The rule of trade which led to the establishment of the Maritime Customs required that it would also have responsibilities in

in the prevention of smuggling, in the definition of port boundaries, or in discharging the duties of harbour master; also in the distribution of lights [i.e. lighthouses and lightships], buoys, beacons [etc.].³³

The first Inspector-General of the Imperial Maritime Customs was Horatio Nelson Lay, but he was dismissed in 1863 for involvement in a misconceived attempt to, as the British Minister in Beijing put it, 'make China the vassal of England... [which] showed an utter incapacity to comprehend China'.³⁴ In March 1861, Robert Hart was appointed joint Acting Inspector General of the new

²⁸ Hart to Campbell, 12 Jan. 1896, no. 1003 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. II, p. 1047.

²⁹ *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization: His Journals, 1863-1866*, ed. by Richard J. Smith, John K. Fairbank, and Katherine F. Bruner (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 287, 291; Chih-Hui Tsai, 'Robert Hart's Relationship with the Late Qing Bureaucracy' (unpublished Ph.D., Queen's University Belfast, 2016).

³⁰ Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1800-1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 201.

³¹ Jennifer Pitman, 'China's Presence at the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876', *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, 10.1 (2002), 35-73; Hyungju Hur, 'Staging Modern Statehood: World Exhibitions and the Rhetoric of Publishing in Late Qing China, 1851-1910' (unpublished Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012).

³² On the 'branding' of the Imperial Post, see Weipin Tsai, 'The Qing Empire's Last Flowering', pp. 916-17.

³³ Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, p. 134.

³⁴ Frederick Bruce to Harry Parkes, 2 Jan. 1864 in Bruce to Earl Russell, 13 Jan. 1864 (TNA, FO 17/407).

Maritime Customs.³⁵ After Lay's dismissal, Hart was appointed formally in 1863 as the sole I. G., and under Robert Hart, the Maritime Customs became a vast infrastructural administration, supervising navigation, lighthouses and surveys.³⁶

Hart claimed to have first proposed the creation of a Chinese post office in his introductory meetings with Prince Gong and the influential Chinese official Wenxiang, in the summer of 1861.³⁷ Among several reasons why Hart's claim is plausible is that he had a personal connection to postal administration: he was close to his maternal uncle Richard Edgar, who was from at least 1842 until his death in 1865 the postmaster in Portadown, the Irish town where Hart was born.³⁸ Such a radical proposal did not find official favour, and Hart seems not to have brought it up again for another fifteen years.³⁹ Hart's 1865 memorandum *Ju wei pang guang lun* 局外旁观论 [*A Bystander's View*] is sometimes cited in connection with a postal service, but Hart in that document was careful to mention only telegraphs, and not a national post.⁴⁰ This was not an accident, but a deliberate consequence of a distinction Hart was attempting to draw between Western *technology* (which he argued China should adopt liberally) and Western *methods* (where Hart advocated a piecemeal approach).

The omission of postal services from *A Bystander's View* is particularly striking - and meaningful - because Hart revised the document in 1865 just as he was actually starting to organise a limited courier route. The Customs first became involved in postal services not as a national or even a public undertaking, but through one very specific task: conveying the mail of foreign officials in Beijing. Under the treaties concluded during and after the Second Opium War, the Chinese government was obliged from to take foreign diplomatic mail from the newly established legations in Beijing to the coast, using 'the government couriers employed for the transmission of official despatches'.⁴¹ In the autumn of 1865, the Zongli Yamen requested that the Inspector-General and his headquarters should relocate permanently from Shanghai to Beijing, after which the Zongli Yamen asked the Customs to take over the Yamen's diplomatic post operations.⁴² The Customs collected the Legations' post, took it to the couriers for dispatch, received it at its destination, and passed it on for onward distribution, as well as carrying out the same process in reverse for incoming mail.⁴³ Soon afterwards, the Customs retained its own couriers, all on foot, paid per trip.⁴⁴ By 1867, the Customs was carrying

³⁵ Circular no. 1, 30 June 1861, in *Inspector General's Circulars, 1861 to 1892*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 1, p. 1.

³⁶ Charles P. Lucas, 'Sir Robert Hart', in *Despatches, Letters, Memoranda, Etc. Index*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 7, pp. 375–88.

³⁷ Robert Hart, 'Chinese Imperial Post: Inaugurated by Imperial Decree [Circular No. 706, Second Series], 9th April 1896', in *Inspector General's Circulars, 1893 to 1910*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 2, pp. 42–52 (p. 42); Hart's 1861 claim is rejected by Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1754n11 but she omits that Hart made the assertion himself.

³⁸ Minutes of Appointments, no. 54, 7 Jan. 1842, Postal Museum, London, POST 58/70, p. 19. On the Edgars, see William Montgomery, *Methodism in Portadown, Third Series* (Belfast: Irish Methodist Pub. Co), p. 12. *The Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory for 1852*, 1 (Colvend, Scotland: Castlepoint Press, 2002), pp. 620, 622; *Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory*, 7 (Belfast: Belfast News-Letter, 1865), pp. 859, 860.

³⁹ Continuous work towards a national postal service is implied by Cheng Ying-wan, pp. 64–65 but Hart's diaries and papers suggest otherwise.

⁴⁰ Robert Hart, 'Ju Wei Pang Guang Lun 局外旁观论 [*A Bystander's View*]', in *Chou Ban Yi Wu Shi Mo: Tongzhi Chao 籌辦夷務始末：同治朝* (Beijing, 2008), pp. 1666–73; On 'Bystander's View', see Luke Kwong, 'Juwei junei di miwang: Hede Pangguan sanlun duhou [A study of Sir Robert Hart's Three Treatises by a Bystander]', in *Zhongguo haiguan yu Zhongguo jindai shehui: Chen Shiqi jiaoshou jiuzhi huadan zhushou wenji 中国海关与中国近代社会：陈诗启教授九秩华诞祝寿文集*, ed. by Yifeng Dai (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue, 2005), pp. 25–45; Chen Zhichuan 陳志川, *Zhongguo zaoqi youzheng de shiliao kao shi 中國早期郵政的史料考實 [A study of early Chinese postal history]* (Taipei, 1965), pp. 27–36.

⁴¹ Theophile Piry, 'Report on the Working of the Post Office for the Year 1904', in *Decennial Reports, 1892-1901, Vol. 2, Appendix II*, pp. xlv ff.

⁴² A date of 1863, two years before Hart's move to Beijing, is provided by Cheng Ying-wan, p. 64, but her footnote at p. 120 n13 is to Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, p. 316; Wright himself gives the date as 1865: pp. 5, 316.

⁴³ Piry, p. xlv; Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', p. 6.

⁴⁴ Xianfeng ser., 80 vols, in *Chou ban yi wu shi mo 籌辦夷務始末 [Complete account of our*

mail weekly between Beijing and Tianjin, and had opened the service to foreigners by subscription or at a cost of 4 tael-cents per standard letter; no postage stamps were issued.⁴⁵ Carrying the Legations' mail also required the Customs to make arrangements for post to be taken to the coast during the winter months, when Tianjin's port was ice-bound. This involved an arduous road journey to Zhenjiang, taking between eight and twelve days, which the Customs first operated in the winter of 1866/7.⁴⁶ To run the winter service, the Customs Post needed post offices not only at the Inspectorate-General in Beijing and at Tianjin, but also at Zhenjiang and Shanghai.⁴⁷ From January 1868, the winter postal arrangements for foreigners in Beijing were also opened to the wider foreign community in Tianjin.⁴⁸

Hart's 1876 postal proposal

In 1876, fifteen years after he first spoke to Chinese officials about a national postal service, Hart revisited the suggestion while mediating between the British and Chinese after the Margary Affair. A junior British diplomat, Augustus Margary, was killed in Yunnan in 1875, and the British Minister in Beijing, Thomas Wade, made extensive demands of the Chinese government in response. When the Chinese would not meet these, Wade left the negotiations on 15 June 1876, the threat of war trailing in his wake, Hart took the opportunity to nudge both governments towards the kind of settlement he hoped to see. On 1 July 1876, Hart visited the American Minister George Seward, who 'asked me why I don't take up Postal work & said he'd give me all his support'.⁴⁹

Hart's decision to bring the postal service into the Sino-British negotiations was a general surprise. The Customs had been running its courier service since 1865, and had given no hint of expansion beyond the Beijing-Tianjin route and the cross-country winter service. Hart's *A Bystander's View*, which animated much of Hart's thinking in the decade after its submission in 1865, had not mentioned a postal service. Aside from a couple of newspaper articles, the subject had been almost wholly ignored by Westerners and self-strengtheners alike.⁵⁰ Bolstered by the interest of the American minister in the subject, and not one to let an opportunity slide, the very next day, Hart went to the Zongli Yamen to discuss what concessions China might offer the British, and suggested that Britain might be interested in China committing to establish a postal service and national mint.⁵¹ On 3 July, the Zongli Yamen confirmed they were prepared to support the enterprise, provided Li Hongzhang (the Viceroy of Zhili, who was to be sent to conclude the negotiations) would support it too. 'They will... mirabile dictu! consent to Postal System & mint if Li approves!' Hart recorded in his diary. 'To think that I shd. have carried their things in such a rush! I cd. not have believed it possible: but I waited patiently for the right time, & have evidently put it in the right way.'⁵² Notably, Hart underlined 'postal system' and not 'mint'; the former was apparently the more remarkable of the two Chinese concessions, to Hart's mind. Hart at this point was confident of British support for his proposals, writing 'with these things in my hands I ought to be able to induce Wade to recommend

management of barbarian affairs], ed. by Wenqing 文慶 (Beijing: Gugong bowuyuan, 1930) juan 72: 20b; 'Chihli' in *Report on the Chinese Post Office: For the Tenth Year of Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921) with Which Is Incorporated an Historical Survey of the Quarter-Century (1896-1921)*, II. Public Series: No. 2, 18 (Shanghai: Supply Dept. of the Directorate General of Posts, 1922), p. 34.

⁴⁵ 'Appendix B: Tientsin Customs Post', in *Report on the Chinese Post Office: For the Tenth Year of Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921)* (Shanghai: Supply Dept. of the Directorate General of Posts, 1922), pp. 105–6.

⁴⁶ 'Chinkiang', China: Imperial Maritime Customs, *Decennial Reports on the Trade, Navigation, Industries, Etc. of the Ports Open to Foreign Commerce in China and Corea, and on the Condition and Development of the Treaty Port Provinces, 1882-1891*, Hai Kuan Tsung Shui Wu Ssü Shu. Maritime Customs. I. Statistical Series No. 6, 1 (Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1893), p. 314.

⁴⁷ Piry, p. xlv.

⁴⁸ 'Chihli', *Report on the Chinese Post Office*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ 1 July 1876 in Robert Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 129, QUBSC, MS 15/1/23.

⁵⁰ Lane Jeremy Harris, p. 169.

⁵¹ 2 July 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 133.

⁵² 3 July 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', pp. 133–35.

the [British] govt. to be content. If so, what a relief it will be all round, &, also, what a useful settlement!⁵³ Hart next went to Tianjin on 10 July 1876 to meet Li Hongzhang, and discussed both a postal service (with lengthy consideration of British postal practices) and the mint.⁵⁴ Li gave the postal proposal his support, once Hart agreed that the Customs post would operate only in the treaty ports, and that 'money and merchandise will not be forwarded. The Chinese *xinju* [Chinese commercial letter agencies] in various places will be left undisturbed.' Li also astutely noted that the British might not be so interested in the project as Hart anticipated.⁵⁵

Li Hongzhang was then appointed to lead the Chinese negotiations, and went to meet Wade in Zhifu (Chefoo, modern Yantai).⁵⁶ In Zhifu, Hart was delighted that his proposals had brought Wade back to the negotiating table. 'I have been in nothing so like real work during my whole previous career, and my hands are now so free that I feel easy and cheerful to an extent I never knew before', he wrote on 24 August.⁵⁷ Hart felt himself on the brink of triumph, but was aware that the British were not wholly in agreement with his proposals. By this point, Hart and Wade were 'merely on bowing terms'. This at least relieved Hart of some of the self-imposed strain of attempting to serve both British and Chinese interests.

I regret this privately for I like the man and respect him, and I also regret it for some Customs' considerations. But in the present crisis nothing could be better for me: it relieves me of all worry, for, no longer a go-between, dodging between both fires, I am plainly on one side and am able to work boldly and with energy.⁵⁸

The disagreement between Hart and Wade has been noted by various historians; Cheng states 'for some unknown reason, Wade had a falling out with Hart', but there is no mystery.⁵⁹ The pressure of being on opposite sides of the negotiations was the final straw for the long-standing but sometimes uneasy friendship between the two men. In Hart's view, Wade ended their friendship simply because 'I have been guilty of the heinous offence of differing from his views and opposing him, [though] I have been doing my duty.'⁶⁰

Li Hongzhang and Wade reached terms on 12 September, and Li signed the agreement on the 13th, accompanied by Hart.⁶¹ Hart considered it an almost unqualified personal victory, noting in his diary, 'D. [Detring] called on Li today & was told that the merit of the settlement here is entirely mine'.⁶² A few days later, Hart considered 'I myself & the Customs are far stronger than ever!'⁶³ Hart wrote in similar terms to Campbell two weeks later, though with a belated hint of modesty, 'The Customs come out of this affair *stronger* than ever: and I don't think there's the slightest chance of capsize for twenty years to come! I begin to think I have *steered* the ship pretty well after all: but it will not do to be indulging in complacency too soon.'⁶⁴

Despite Hart's ebullient mood, the Chefoo Convention agreed on 13 September 1876 excluded the postal service (and the mint). Hart noted in 1896 that the post office plan had failed two decades earlier because of what he called a 'conspiracy of silence'.⁶⁵ Since Li Hongzhang was a keen supporter of the postal scheme in future years, Hart was never in any doubt that the prime mover in

⁵³ *Ibid.*.

⁵⁴ Yi shu han gao 譯署函稿, vols 62-69 in Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, *Li wenzhong gong quan ji* 李文忠公全集, 165 vols (Shanghai, 1921) juan 5 ff 33b-35.

⁵⁵ Li Hongzhang, juan 5, ff 34b-35; See also Cheng Ying-wan, p. 71.

⁵⁶ Morse, vol. II, pp. 299-301; Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, p. 409.

⁵⁷ Hart to Campbell, 24 Aug. 1876, no. 153 Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 223.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁵⁹ Cheng Ying-wan, p. 71.

⁶⁰ Hart to Campbell, 16 Feb. 1878, no 197 [Z/21] in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 265.

⁶¹ 12 & 13 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', pp. 188-90.

⁶² 12 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 188.

⁶³ 15 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 192.

⁶⁴ Hart to Campbell, 3 Oct. 1876 [Z/37], no. 154 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 224.

⁶⁵ Robert Hart, 'Postal: Enclosing Chinese Version of Regulations and Yamen Memorial; Previous Action Recorded. Circular No. 709, 30 Apr. 1896', in *Inspector General's Circulars, 1893 to 1910*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 2, pp. 55-69 (p. 55).

this 'conspiracy' was Wade himself. Hart claimed that Wade told Seward privately that 'he objected to accepting Mint or Post because it was putting too many things - too much power and too much patronage - into my [Hart's] hands!!!'⁶⁶ Wade later relented and went back to Li Hongzhang for a letter confirming China's commitment to both a Mint and a Post Office, but found Li predictably unwilling to bait postal opponents by imposing additional obligations on China after a settlement had been reached.⁶⁷

'Work it quietly': expanding the Customs Post

Having come so unexpectedly close to securing a government postal service, Hart was convinced that China was on the brink of a great wave of governmental innovation. 'Is China on the eve of great things?' he asked himself, on 14 September 1876, the day after Li Hongzhang signed the Chefoo Convention. 'I think she is!' Hart announced in his diary.⁶⁸ Feeling that his personal position in China had been significantly strengthened by the Convention negotiations, Hart pressed his advantage almost before the ink was dry on the Convention.

Hart's strategy was to pursue an incremental expansion of Customs postal services. The Customs would make only small, unobjectionable changes to its public postal services until the idea of a national post became less controversial. Li Hongzhang 'promised to father it [the Customs Post] officially as soon as it proved a success'.⁶⁹ Chinese reformers saw Hart's suddenly enhanced political capital as a useful asset. On 15 September (still at Zhifu), Hart received a visit from the prominent Chinese reformer Tang Tingshu (known in Hart's writings as 'Tong King-sing'), also a key ally of Li Hongzhang. Tang and Hart 'talked... about Post - he'll assist [Gustav] Detring: he too is anxious to make China go ahead & will support myself & the Customs'.⁷⁰ Hart needed all the help he could get. He was fully aware that his plans might rile the *minju* enterprises and the officials operating the existing imperial postal services, as well as the various foreign-run local posts in the treaty ports. Writing to Henry Kopsch, Hart provided no less than three elaborate defences of caution. 'I think if we keep steady, and only move when ready, we're bound to win without the least disaster... Cost is only dear when money's paid for any scheme that fails... It is not a waste of time to do things well'.⁷¹

Central to Hart's plans was Gustav Detring, who was largely responsible for the development of the Customs Post in the years immediately after 1876.⁷² As Customs Commissioner at Zhifu during the Convention negotiations, Detring had been present for and involved in discussions with Li Hongzhang on a range of topics, including postal services. Hosea Ballou Morse, Detring's secretary from 1877 to 1878, notes that the thirty-four-year-old Detring was one of the two people Li had that August 'to advise him' in his negotiations with the British (along with Hart).⁷³ Significantly, Detring as well as Hart accompanied Li at the signing of the Chefoo Convention.⁷⁴ Detring made a good impression on Li during the negotiations, marking the start of Detring's role as Li's advisor, a relationship which endured for the next quarter of a century.⁷⁵ Within a few years, Detring's growing influence with Li Hongzhang made him a rival to Hart. The postal service precipitated the first serious disagreements between Hart and Detring, though by no means their last.⁷⁶

⁶⁶ Hart to Campbell, 25 Oct. 1877, no. 184 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 252.

⁶⁷ Li Hongzhang, *juan* 6 f. 30.

⁶⁸ 14 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 190.

⁶⁹ Piry, p. xlv.

⁷⁰ 15 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 191.

⁷¹ Hart to Kopsch, cited in Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', p. 7.

⁷² Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1779; See esp. Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', p. 7.

⁷³ Morse, vol. II p. 300 and p. 300n79.

⁷⁴ 12 & 13 Sep. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', pp. 188–90.

⁷⁵ Vera Schmidt, *Aufgabe und Einfluß der europäischen Berater in China: Gustav Detring (1842-1913) im Dienste Li Hung-changs* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984), pp. 4, 7; *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, & the Philippines, for the Year 1877* (Hong Kong: Hongkong Daily Press, 1877), p. 88.

⁷⁶ Schmidt, p. 56; Hans van de Ven, pp. 660–61.

At least initially, Hart attempted to keep close control of Detring's postal work. Hart spent much of August and September of 1876 in Zhifu with Detring during the negotiations, dining together, discussing and socialising. Hart's relationship with Detring later became notoriously complicated, but in 1876, it was civil, even cordial, despite Hart's occasional exasperation. Detring had joined the Customs in April 1865, and struck Hart as an unprepossessing character: 'Yesterday Detring arrived, covered with boils; he seems a pleasant, intelligent young fellow; but he lisps somewhat, & will always speak Chinese with an accent.'⁷⁷ By 1869, Hart was complaining that Detring was 'pugnacious [and] hot-headed' and 'irascible'.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, in 1874, Hart was sufficiently concerned for Detring's welfare to extend his home leave because his wife was unwell.⁷⁹

Detring's initial plan for postal expansion was not exactly what either Hart or Li had been expecting. On 3 December 1876, while in Tianjin, Hart prepared a 'memo for Detring about Postal matters'.⁸⁰ Among Hart's criticisms of Detring's approach was that he had neglected the question of postage stamps. The following day, Hart went to see Li Hongzhang, who complained Detring's proposal was too ambitious to find favour in Beijing, with Li telling Hart he was

interested in Postal matter, but thinks Detring's plan (chü-mien) [局面] too large – it wd not do to put it that way before the Yamên – we must work it quietly & must not expect too much, for, without steam communication & with less activity than in Europe, the Post here cannot at once become a widely spread or very paying affair.⁸¹

Stamps were essential to Hart's plan for several reasons. 'Without postage stamps we cannot begin', Hart wrote in his diary. 'This is what I said at first, & proposed to start.'⁸² Firstly, Hart considered that full prepayment by the sender was essential in order for a postal service to be affordable and efficient. It was also a requirement for participation in international postal agreements.⁸³ This contrasted with the practice of the *xinju*, which generally collected half the payment from the recipient. The *xinju* also typically permitted monthly settlement of accounts, rather than demanding payment upfront.⁸⁴ Hart insisted on prepayment through stamps even when his staff suggested that 'prepayment of postage is altogether alien to Chinese ideas'.⁸⁵ Hart's determination to impose global, and specifically British, practices in the Customs Post ensured it would not attract many Chinese customers, at least at first. Although Hart's long-term objective was to supplant the *xinju* with a public postal system, it was politically convenient for the Customs Post in the 1870s not to be seen as a competitor to the *xinju*, thus avoiding the wrath of their proprietors.

Secondly, government postage stamps are a significant if easily overlooked method for representing the state and projecting government power. Since Hart knew the take-up of stamps by Chinese was likely to be small, the audience for this visual representation of Chinese sovereignty was primarily foreign. Hart had emerged from the Convention with a renewed determination to further Chinese interests. 'Since my split with Wade', he wrote in 1877, 'we [the Customs] are far stronger in China... "going in a *one-er*" for China alone, I am freed from the worry of trying to please two parties'.⁸⁶ Hart was developing an interest in visual displays as the Customs coordinated Chinese exhibits at international exhibitions, including Philadelphia in 1876 and Paris in 1878. With stamps and exhibitions, Hart sought not only to develop foreign curiosity about China (and therefore to boost trade) but also to remind the Western public that the legitimate authority in China was the Chinese

⁷⁷ 22 Oct. 1865 in Robert Hart, 'Diary Vol. 7', p. 131, QUBSC, MS 15/1/7.

⁷⁸ Hart to Campbell, 27 Jan. 1869, no. 3 and 30 Jan. 1869, no. 4 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I p. 42.

⁷⁹ Hart to Campbell, 20 June 1874, no. 99 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 167.

⁸⁰ 3 Dec. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 248.

⁸¹ 4 Dec. 1876 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 23', p. 250.

⁸² 21 Sep. 1877 in Robert Hart, 'Diary Vol. 24', p. 247, QUBSC, MS 15/1/24.

⁸³ Though several decades later, the Imperial Post actually negotiated a limited deviation from this principle: see below.

⁸⁴ 'Chinese Postal Service', *T'oung Pao*, 5.1 (1894), 63–64.

⁸⁵ H. Kopsch to I.G., despatch no. 24, 4 February 1885, SHAC 679 (1) 14907, cited in Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1778.

⁸⁶ Hart to Campbell, 5 Aug. 1877, no. 369 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 291.

government, including the Maritime Customs, and not the foreign concessions.

Detring's stamp proposal

Though Detring was uncertain about the importance of stamps, Hart was insistent, and Detring produced the first designs for a Customs postal service stamp early in 1877. Detring submitted these directly to the Customs agent in London, James Campbell, without referring to Hart.⁸⁷ Detring was impatient to proceed, while Hart in the spring and summer of 1877 was stretched thin. As well as securing a set of gunboats and quarrelling with Wade over the *Cadiz* hulk (supposedly the cause of subsidence around Zhenjiang harbour), Hart was also making preparations for China's pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1878. In addition, Hart had his routine duties as Inspector General. He left Beijing on 25 March 1877 to tour the treaty ports, after which he received correspondence only intermittently until his return on 12 October 1877.⁸⁸

Not having received any confirmation from Campbell, Detring pinned Hart down in person on 9 May during Hart's port tour. Hart authorised Detring to buy equipment for stamp production, the cost of which paled alongside the expense of the China pavilion for the 1878 Paris exhibition, the North China section of which Detring was also organising. At one particularly busy - and expensive - meeting with Detring in May 1877, Hart 'handed Detring Exhibition instructions (Tls 20,000) & Postal memo (2) with £1000 to promise machinery for making stamps, &c.'. ⁸⁹ The following day, Hart 'asked Detring if I cd. do anything more: he said - no'. Hart responded by advocating a management philosophy which must have struck Detring as ironic, coming from such a micro-manager as Hart: 'I told him not to weary himself studying intricate details but to prepare the simple things required for a modest beginning'.⁹⁰ Detring seems to have taken that as a mandate to forge ahead with the stamps as he saw fit.

Detring had sent Campbell his stamp designs along with a request for Campbell's opinion and for Campbell to prepare to get them printed, suggesting Hart had approved them.⁹¹ Campbell had been an official in the British Post Office for a few months in 1854, and Detring implied that he was asking for Campbell's advice because of Campbell's postal experience.⁹² In the spring of 1877, however, Campbell was being assailed from several quarters in relation to the Customs postal service, and feared being drawn into a turf war among his colleagues. Campbell wrote to Hart on 11 May to complain that another Customs Commissioner, the Briton Henry Kopsch, 'now... also wants information for a "postage system" he is "trying to get up"'.⁹³ Meanwhile, German interest in the Customs post was growing. As well as Detring, the ambitious German Customs commissioner at Xiamen, F. Kleinwächter, informed the Chinese minister that he was visiting Berlin to learn about the post.⁹⁴ Hart regarded Kleinwächter as 'disputatious'.⁹⁵ Kleinwächter had stated his intention was to 'study the German postal system so as to be able to lend his services if required to Li Hung Chang [Li Hongzhang] who in conjunction with Mr. Hart wished to establish Post Offices at the various open ports'.⁹⁶ Faced with the possibility of German intervention in the postal service, Campbell advised the Chinese authorities that they should not assist Kleinwächter unless requested to do so by

⁸⁷ Robert Ronald Campbell, *James Duncan Campbell: A Memoir by His Son* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1970), p. 92.

⁸⁸ 25 Mar. & 12 Oct. 1877 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 24', pp. 82, 258; Hart to Campbell, 5 Apr. 1877, no. 336 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 266.

⁸⁹ 9 May 1877 in Hart, 'Diary Vol. 24', p. 109.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Campbell, p. 92.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹³ James Campbell to Robert Hart, no. 92, 11 May 1877, SOAS, PP MS 67/3/1/91.

⁹⁴ Campbell to Hart, 4 Jan. 1878 [A/147 (A/151)], no. 412 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 333.

⁹⁵ Hart to Campbell, 30 Jan. 1869, no. 4 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I p. 43; Kleinwächter's younger brother George, also a customs official, was discharged in 1885 for insanity after accusing his brother of colluding with Germany to interfere with China's indemnities to France. Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, p. 514.

⁹⁶ Campbell to Hart, 4 Jan. 1878 [A/148 (A/152)], no. 413 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 334.

Hart directly.

To Campbell, this looked at best like over-exuberance by ambitious Customs Commissioners, and at worst a concerted German attempt to undermine Hart's authority. Campbell proposed to take the stamps out of the hands of individual Commissioners and to handle them through a company in London. Inspired by his own brief time in the British Post Office and by his employer's philosophy that 'cost is only dear when money's paid for any scheme that fails... [and] it is not a waste of time to do things well', Campbell commissioned an expert report from a London firm, De La Rue, and refused to act on instructions unless signed by Hart. He wrote to Hart in May (responding to Detring's enquiry of some weeks earlier) that:

I have been making enquiries for Detring respecting postage stamps, and... I hope to have an elaborate report ready by next week... and I am told not to consider any orders official unless they bear your seal and signature. (I note by the way that Requisitions are to be signed in future by the Chief Secretary.)⁹⁷

Campbell went so far as to propose taking the entire Customs Post project away from the existing Commissioners. 'If you intend to introduce a postal system in China, you ought, I feel sure, to secure the services of a thoroughly practical man. The G. P. O. [General Post Office in London] would no doubt lend you a man, but they would have the credit of the work of the Customs.' Campbell had, as he usually did, a nominee in mind: Frank Ives Scudamore, a postal administrator employed by the Turkish government, whom Campbell considered well qualified to take over Hart's postal plans.⁹⁸

British expertise: the De La Rue report

Campbell's intervention was the end of Detring's original stamp designs. The company Campbell consulted, De La Rue, was a prominent British manufacturer of stamps and banknotes with strong views about the importance of expertise in stamp production. The Guernsey printer Thomas De La Rue had began making stamps in London in 1855. By the 1870s, the company (now run by Thomas's grandson Warren William) was Britain's leading producer of adhesive stamps. De La Rue in this period was noted for its technical rather than artistic innovation, with a conservative visual style that emphasised precision.⁹⁹ Warren William De La Rue had a 'one track mind' and a 'readiness to expound the underlying principles of the firm's business on the slightest excuse, and at prodigious length'.¹⁰⁰

Campbell was sufficiently enthused by the stamp project to make a personal inspection of De La Rue's premises.¹⁰¹ Campbell was shown around by Warren William De La Rue in May 1877.¹⁰² It was then over ten years since De La Rue's had last been commissioned to produce foreign stamps (excepting clients in the British Empire), but Warren William was accustomed to informing his clients of what they needed rather than incorporating their suggestions.¹⁰³ Stamps, he insisted, should be of De La Rue's standard size, should be designed with fraud in mind (regardless of the circumstances in which they were to be sold), and should be printed in England.

The fact is that stamp-printing is quite a different art to ordinary type-printing, and it requires men specially and highly trained for the purpose, working under our immediate and close personal supervision. Moreover it can only be carried to a successful issue in a temperate and

⁹⁷ James Campbell to Robert Hart, no. 92, 11 May 1877, SOAS, PP MS 67/3/1/91.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* The name is misread by Chen & Han as 'Sendamore' in their no. 345 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 272.

⁹⁹ John Easton, *The De La Rue History of British & Foreign Postage Stamps, 1855 to 1901* (London: Published for the Royal Philatelic Society by Faber, 1958), pp. xviii, xx.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

¹⁰¹ Campbell caught a cold while he was there. Campbell to Hart, 11 May 1877 [Z/53], no. 345 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 272.

¹⁰² 'De La Rue Correspondence Book Relating to China', 1877, Postal Museum, London, DLR/31.

¹⁰³ Easton, pp. 788–89.

equable climate such as that of England.¹⁰⁴

De La Rue's typically expansive 42-page report was not finished until 18 June 1877, and Campbell forwarded it to Hart on 22 June.¹⁰⁵ Not content with simply describing the deficiencies of Detring's proposal, De La Rue's included hand-painted designs for the stamps in both horizontal (fig. 1) and vertical format.¹⁰⁶ Since they had not been given a specification, De La Rue's had to guess at the details, noting of their 'alternative sketches of the proposed Postage Stamps for China [that] - the duties are merely suppositions'.¹⁰⁷ The designs comprised a 1 cent denomination in lake (pinkish-red), a 2 cent in green, and a 5 cent in orange. For all values, the design included two stylised dragons around a yin-yang symbol, with a complex border. In these essays, the value tablet in Chinese was the only text, reading '一分', '二分', or '五分' (one, two or five cents).¹⁰⁸



Fig. 1: De La Rue essays, horizontal format (1877). Image courtesy of Interasia Auctions Ltd. (Hong Kong)

Emboldened by Hart's instructions on 9 May, and still waiting for Campbell to act on his earlier letter, Detring wrote again to Campbell. A detailed memorandum about postage stamps from Detring to Campbell was lost in the post when it went down with the *Meikong* off the coast of Somalia on 17 June 1877, but Detring's requisition for stamp production equipment arrived with Campbell while the De La Rue report was making its way to China. On 6 July, Campbell wrote to Hart again about Detring's stamps. 'I have been put in a fix by Detring's Requisition', Campbell complained. 'Even if I were to order the things, they would [not] be ready for 3 or 4 months'.¹⁰⁹ Anticipating Detring's disappointment, Campbell was sufficiently anxious to telegraph Hart, warning that

¹⁰⁴ Warren William De La Rue, 2 May 1878, cited in Easton, p. 791.

¹⁰⁵ De La Rue dated it 8 June: 'De La Rue Correspondence Book Relating to China'; Easton, p. 832. Telegram, Campbell to Hart [no. 171], 4 July 1877, no. 305 in Chen and Han, vol. III p. 1058-9.

¹⁰⁶ As Appendix J to the report; reproductions of the now privately-held essays are in Frank Walton, *The De La Rue Collection* (6 vols., London: The Royal Philatelic Society, 2014), vol. 2, pp 2567. See also 'Appendix A' at p. 2566.

¹⁰⁷ De La Rue's original hand-painted essays were formerly in the De La Rue archives, but were sold at auction in 1977 (email from Postal Museum, 12 June 2018).

¹⁰⁸ De La Rue also supplied a circular rose-lilac design for a 1 cent value, and a dark green oval 2 cent which could be embossed onto envelopes, in addition to examples of envelopes with the stamped embossing on them. See Ireland, p. ix.

¹⁰⁹ Campbell to Hart, 6 July 1877 [A/127], no. 363 in Chen and Han, vol. I, p. 286.

Detring's ideas were misguided and that stamp production required British expertise:

Postal requisition impracticable. Machine Paper Ink all unsuitable Elaborate report mailed twenty second June If you send immediately design for last stamp British postage size and telegraph instructions upon receipt report all kinds can be delivered here ten weeks afterwards price fifty five Pounds per Million Special experience required Time expense saved & protection from forgery ensured by starting manufacture here transferring to China afterwards.¹¹⁰

The following week on 13 July, Campbell wrote again to Hart, excusing his decision not to undertake Detring's instruction in more detail. 'The delay will, no doubt, cause your disappointment - but even if I had ordered the things from the firms named in the Requisitions, six months would probably elapse before they all reached Shanghai... By employing De La Rue's not only will the order be promptly executed, but time and expense will be saved'.¹¹¹ Campbell was more blunt to Detring, insisting to him in August 1877 that if they were to proceed 'without proper appliances it would simply be courting imperfection'.¹¹²

For Campbell to refuse to carry out an instruction which Detring said had been sanctioned by Hart was a radical departure for a man whom Hart 'thoroughly trusted'.¹¹³ Campbell's chief instruction to his son regarding Hart was 'he is stern and relentless... do your best and serve him loyally'.¹¹⁴ Yet Campbell's expectation that Hart would wish him to defy Detring and to procure stamps from Britain instead was a reasonable one. Hart had modelled his basic postal principles on the British Post Office, so why not the stamps themselves? Moreover, Hart generally secured foreign, typically British, experts to advise on infrastructure. As Hans van de Ven has noted, infrastructural projects had a symbolic function, exemplifying the benefits of 'the centralization of power, the creation of an efficient and honest bureaucracy, and the adoption of Western technologies'.¹¹⁵ When Hart finally had time - once he was back in Beijing in October 1877 - to write to Campbell about the stamps, Hart indeed agreed with Campbell that Detring's proposal would not do. Cautious as ever, he noted to Campbell, 'I don't want to follow the sanguine Detring too rashly. I must feel my footing to be secure before attempting to push on.'¹¹⁶ Hart was satisfied also with Campbell's selection of De La Rue, concluding 'we'll get our stamps made there'.¹¹⁷

De La Rue did not get the commission, however, The philatelist Philip Ireland calls De La Rue's designs 'insipid', and suggests this may be why they were not approved.¹¹⁸ De La Rue's inflexibility and imperious manner were perhaps equally off-putting. By January 1878, De La Rue had 'frequently enquired' whether a decision had been made about his proposals.¹¹⁹ De La Rue also supplied a set of Christmas cards to the British diplomat Herbert Giles; Giles passed these to two senior Chinese officials: the Viceroy of Liangguang, Liu Kunyi, and Jun Qi, the new Chinese Superintendent of Customs at Guangzhou. Jun Qi replied of the Christmas cards on 25 December 1877: 'of the 'pictures (by Messrs De La Rue & c/o) you were kind enough to enclose, I can only say that the artist has made them into living realities'.¹²⁰ Using Giles to refer the question to a Chinese Customs Superintendent was probably an unwise move by De La Rue, particularly in view of the

¹¹⁰ Telegram, Campbell to Hart [no. 171], 4 July 1877, no. 305 in Chen and Han, vol. III, pp. 1058–59.

¹¹¹ Campbell to Hart, 13 July 1877 [A/129], no. 365 in Chen and Han, vol. I, pp. 286–7.

¹¹² Campbell, p. 92.

¹¹³ Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, pp. 8–9.

¹¹⁴ Campbell, p. xviii.

¹¹⁵ Hans J. van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 90.

¹¹⁶ Hart to Campbell, 25 Oct. 1877, no. 184 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, p. 252. Hart's famous 'caution' has been noted by almost every historian to have written about him. Morse, vol. III, p. 399; Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, p. 856.

¹¹⁷ Hart to Campbell, 25 Oct. 1877, no. 184 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, p. 252 and 253n3.

¹¹⁸ Ireland, p. 16.

¹¹⁹ Campbell to Hart, 4 Jan. 1878 [A/147 (A/151)], no. 412 in Chen and Han, vol. I p. 333.

¹²⁰ 'De La Rue Correspondence Book Relating to China'. This remark by Jun Qi [Chūn Ch'i] has previously been incorrectly described as a comment on De La Rue's stamp essays.

strained relationship between Hart and the British representatives in China at that time. More importantly, Detring was becoming tired of waiting for Hart and Campbell to take action on the stamps. Near the end of 1877, 'acting upon instructions from Detring', F. A. Morgan (on leave in London) began making postal enquiries independent of Campbell.¹²¹ Detring wrote to Campbell in terse fashion, noting:

I have read De La Rue's report on Postage Stamps, and now send you enclosed four designs which have been adopted by the Inspector General for the various Haikuan values required. The designs are of course to be reduced to ordinary postage stamp dimensions. The colours to be used are, you will observe, sufficiently explained in the enclosure.¹²²

Detring enclosed an 'order for Postage Stamps to be transmitted through the Non-Resident Secretary [Campbell]', signed only by Detring. This was then the second occasion on which Detring sent postage stamp designs to Campbell for printing, and the third occasion on which Detring had sent Campbell a stamp-related request which Campbell did not carry out. Campbell informed Hart he would not procure the stamps unless he received orders from Hart himself, excusing himself by quoting back to Hart '[your] observation... that you must feel your footing to be sure before attempting to push on'.¹²³ That was the end of Campbell's involvement in the production of Customs postage stamps.

The Large Dragon stamps

Exasperated by Campbell's refusal to effect his requests, Detring now preferred to avoid dealing with London entirely. Detring's personal position and his links to Li Hongzhang were strengthening by 1878.¹²⁴ Detring was confirmed as the Customs Commissioner in Tianjin on 1 October 1877.¹²⁵ As well as improving the existing Beijing-Tianjin and Tianjin-Zhenjiang routes, Detring wanted to initiate Customs postal services at the other two northern treaty ports which like Tianjin were often ice-bound in winter, namely Zhifu and Niuzhuang.¹²⁶ Meanwhile Hart's principal concerns in the spring of 1878 were the imminent Paris Exhibition, as well as Chinese diplomacy, procurement of weapons, and Hart's imminent reunification with his family.¹²⁷ When Hart left Beijing for Paris on 5 March 1878, the question of the stamps had yet to be resolved. On 9 March 1878, as Hart waited at Tianjin to embark for the Paris Exhibition, he gave Detring authorisation to expand postal services, leaving Detring to finalise the stamp.¹²⁸

With Hart gone, Detring opened a daily postal service between Tianjin and Beijing on 23 March 1878 - two days after Hart's ship to Europe left Chinese waters.¹²⁹ The service was officially opened to the public on 1 May 1878 - without postage stamps.¹³⁰ Hence Detring launched the service before the Customs Post stamps were ready, exactly what Hart had wished to avoid. By printing through the Customs Statistical Department at Shanghai, Detring could settle the stamps without further reference to Hart or Campbell, or even Bredon, Hart's brother-in-law and Acting Inspector-General.¹³¹ One of Detring's own staff, H. B. Morse, was acting as Statistical Secretary in Shanghai

¹²¹ Campbell to Hart, 4 Jan. 1878 [A/147 (A/151)], no. 412 in Chen and Han, vol. I, p. 334.

¹²² Campbell to Hart, 4 Jan. 1878 [A/148 (A/152)], no. 413 in Chen and Han, vol. I, p. 334.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Schmidt, pp. 20, 26–27.

¹²⁵ Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1758.

¹²⁶ 'Chefoo', China: Imperial Maritime Customs, p. 74; Piry, p. xlv. On the operation of the 1878 services, see Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', pp. 1758–64.

¹²⁷ See e.g. Hart to Campbell 28 July 1878, no. 209 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, pp. 271–272.

¹²⁸ March 1878 Robert Hart, 'Diary Vol. 25', QUBSC, MS 15/1/25 *passim*.

¹²⁹ 'Summary of Customs Commissioner's Report on the working of Tientsin Overland Courier Service (July 1879) in 'Appendix B: Tientsin Customs Post', pp. 105–6.

¹³⁰ 'Chihli' in *Report on the Chinese Post Office*, p. 34; Li Hongzhang, juan 8 f. 18.

¹³¹ The episode seems to have damaged Morse's relationship with Detring, who took the first

in the spring of 1878 and had a significant role in the production of the stamps.¹³² The design, too, was done locally. Wright recorded that the Customs stamp was 'the design of a Chinese artist', but did not include the name.¹³³ Various designs were essayed by the Statistical Department, all similar in style: an elephant, a less well-known six-storied pagoda, and a dragon.¹³⁴ The approved design (fig. 2) was much simpler than De La Rue's proposal, and showed a single coiled five-clawed dragon surrounding a flaming pearl, as traditionally found in Qing imperial iconography.¹³⁵



Fig. 2: Large Dragon stamp (set of all three values). Image courtesy of the China Customs Museum.

The choice of a dragon for the Customs stamp, over the elephant or pagoda designs, was a straightforward one. The imperial dragon symbolised the Chinese state, the authority of which Hart was keen to both demonstrate and deploy through the Customs Post. In 1862, an azure dragon chasing a pearl on a yellow field had been adopted as the Western-style Qing flag, and a similar flag was adopted by the Maritime Customs in 1873.¹³⁶ Apart from the presence of a dragon, the approved design was very different from De La Rue's proposals, but bore a striking resemblance to the early stamps of the Shanghai Local Post (fig. 3).¹³⁷ Administered by the Shanghai Municipal Council in the International Concession, the Shanghai Local Post had begun issuing stamps in August 1865, and by the time it closed in 1898, it had produced four separate stamp issues.¹³⁸ Its very first stamp, the

opportunity to be transferred to Beijing later in 1878, since Detring was 'not liked at the Inspectorate'. See John K. Fairbank, Martha Henderson Coolidge, and Richard J. Smith, *H. B. Morse: Customs Commissioner and Historian of China* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 48.

¹³² Though he was not the artist, as is sometimes suggested. See Ireland, p. 26.

¹³³ Note on Circular 204 in Wright, *Inspector General's Circulars, 1861 to 1892*, Documents, vol. I, p. 437n; this footnote is by the editor, Stanley Wright; see 'Preface'. The remark is frequently (but mistakenly) attributed to Hart (1882), e.g. in Ireland, p. 26.

¹³⁴ Ireland, pp. 18–19.

¹³⁵ J. Keith Wilson, 'Powerful Form and Potent Symbol: The Dragon in Asia', *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 77.8 (1990), 286–323 (p. 307).

¹³⁶ Lane Harris, 'Standard Messages: Institutional Identity and Symbolism in Chinese Postal Flags, 1896–1949', *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology*, 15 (2008), 81–106 (p. 85) <<https://doi.org/10.5840/raven2008154>>.

¹³⁷ Lane J. Harris, 'Stumbling towards Empire: The Shanghai Local Post Office, the Transnational British Community and Informal Empire in China, 1863–97', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2018, p. 9 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1431433>>.

¹³⁸ 'Appendix C: Note on the Shanghai (Municipal) Local Post', in *Report on the Chinese Post Office: For the Tenth Year of Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921)* (Shanghai: Supply Dept. of the Directorate General of Posts, 1922), pp. 107–9 (p. 107).

'Big Dragon of the Municipal Council', bore a coiled dragon at its centre.¹³⁹ The Customs Large Dragon not only capitalised on the familiarity of the Shanghai stamp; it was also an effort to claw back the imperial symbol from the Shanghai Municipal Council, which frequently sought to exercise quasi-sovereign authority, thumbing its nose at the Chinese government. When Hart discovered later that the SMC was considering joining the Universal Postal Union, he was incensed.¹⁴⁰ For a foreign concession to join an multinational body would undermine China's sovereignty, and Hart telegraphed Campbell that he should immediately tell the Postal Union 'that can't be done' since 'Shanghai is not free town but Chinese port can neither negotiate nor enter: and such recognition will be resented by China and bring ridicule on [the Postal] Union'.¹⁴¹



Fig. 3: Shanghai Big Dragon, 1866. The Chinese text reads '上海工部書信館[书信馆]六分銀' (Shanghai Works Department Post Office, Six Candarins). Image courtesy of the China National Post and Postage Stamp Museum.

The Customs stamp design balanced Detring's preoccupations with Hart's. The three-candarin stamp, which was to be the standard denomination, was printed in auspicious red while the five-candarin was lightened from De La Rue's proposed orange to imperial yellow. The Chinese text around the border read optimistically '大清郵政局' [Great Qing Post Office], though no such imperial edict had been issued. 'China' now appeared in a European language, as was required by the Universal Postal Union.¹⁴² The value was printed both in Roman characters and in Chinese, the latter in bankers' numerals, as, '壹', '叁' and '伍'. Since each denomination was a different colour, the use of anti-fraud numerals was less about discouraging emendations of the stamps than it was about giving the stamps the appropriate air of authority.

Hart, Campbell and Detring

None of the three men most involved in the discussions over the stamp was satisfied with the outcome. Campbell, who had been so impressed by De La Rue's forceful opinions, complained of the Large Dragons that they could not truly be considered postage stamps as Westerners understood them: 'the stamps are a most crude affair and do not possess any of the qualities requisite for a true stamp'.¹⁴³ Detring, on the other hand, still 'preferred the design he [originally] sent through', while

¹³⁹ Fan Shi, *The Stamps of China: 1878-1981* (Beijing: Foreign languages Press, 1996), p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ On the SMC, see Isabella Jackson, 'Who Ran the Treaty Ports? A Study of the Shanghai Municipal Council', in *Treaty Ports in Modern China: Law, Land and Power*, ed. by Robert A. Bickers and Isabella Jackson, Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 43–60; Isabella Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁴¹ 14 Dec. 1892 in Robert Hart, 'Diary Vol. 42', p. 248, QUBSC, MS 15/1/42; Hart to Campbell, telegram 14 Dec. 1892 [No. 912], no. 2067 in Chen and Han, vol. III, p. 1286.

¹⁴² Ireland, p. 16.

¹⁴³ Campbell, p. 92.

Hart was vexed that Detring had produced the Dragons without getting wider Customs approval.¹⁴⁴ As well as the stamp controversy, there was a serious incident where the couriers on the Tianjin-Zhenjiang road were arrested and the mail interrupted after Detring concluded an agreement with a disreputable Chinese intermediary.¹⁴⁵ For Hart, this was of a pattern with Detring's failure to consult colleagues in the Customs Service before commissioning the stamp. After Hart's return from France to China in 1879, he complained that Detring had commissioned the stamp without consulting colleagues and urged Detring in future to get official approval before taking significant decisions.¹⁴⁶

Both Campbell and Detring remained angry about the Dragon Stamp for years afterwards, and the stamp controversy contributed to Detring operating with increasing independence from the Customs administration. Campbell's annoyance over the incident seeps from the pages of the biography written by his son, for whom 'Detring was an obstinate man who liked to have his own way'.¹⁴⁷ In 1881, Detring complained about Campbell at length to another Customs Commissioner, F. E. Taylor, who did his best to broker peace:

I had a long talk with Detring... on the postal stamp business. I explained that your anxiety on the matter and your wish to have the postal service securely instituted had been the cause of your not fulfilling his requisition, and of course you had no authority from the I. G. I also said that you were authorised by the I. G. to obtain professional advice in the matter and that professional advice was strongly against the matter being started in the proposed way.¹⁴⁸

On 22 December 1879, Hart appointed Detring 'Commissioner for Postal Matters', despite Hart's frustrations with Detring's 'sanguine' approach, which had contributed to several postal embarrassments as well as successes. Also in 1879, the Customs Post was extended to further ports and given the name 'Post Office of the Maritime Customs' (海关拨驛达书信馆).¹⁴⁹ All other Customs Commissioners were instructed by Hart that 'the directions which Mr Detring, in purely postal matters, will hereafter issue are to be given effect by you'.¹⁵⁰ This was a notable deviation from one of Hart's foundational principles for the IMC: that no Commissioner should be superior to any other. In his 1864 code of conduct for the Customs, Hart had stated that he would 'totally disapprove of any interference, on the part of any Commissioner, with affairs of any kind... at another port... it is to be clearly understood... that whatever be their titles, and whatever their rates of pay, the officers selected to take charge of the ports are regarded by the Inspector General as... on precisely the same footing'.¹⁵¹

Detring's elevation, despite his early postal setbacks, was due to both his enthusiasm and his relationship with Li Hongzhang. Hart had briefly considered replacing Detring in July 1879, but Li was experimenting with railways and telegraphs.¹⁵² In that year, Li opened a telegraph line between Tianjin and the coast at Dagou, and two years later a line from Tianjin to Shanghai.¹⁵³ Li also arranged for the Customs Post to have free use of his China Merchants Steam Navigation Company.¹⁵⁴ Li gave the Yamen a cautiously positive report on Detring and Hart's experiment. Li and Hart's relationship had always been a complex one, and Li briefly proposed taking the postal service out of Hart's control and placing it under Chinese territorial authority, even at the cost of undermining its national scope.¹⁵⁵ In 1881 Li considered trying to put the Americans in control of the postal service while negotiating

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Weipin Tsai, 'Breaking the Ice', p. 1768.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1777.

¹⁴⁷ Campbell, p. 92.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ 'Chihli' in *Report on the Chinese Post Office*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Hart, 'Postal Service: Experimental Establishment at the Northern Ports, and Proposed Gradual Extension [Circular No. 89, 2nd Ser.], 22 Dec. 1879', in *Inspector General's Circulars, 1861 to 1892*, ed. by Stanley Fowler Wright, Documents, vol. 1, pp. 401–2 (p. 402).

¹⁵¹ Hart, 'The Customs Service, the Spirit That Ought to Animate It', pp. 43, 45.

¹⁵² Hart to Campbell, 27 July 1879, no. 252 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 298.

¹⁵³ Chu, p. 6.

¹⁵⁴ 'Chihli' in *Report on the Chinese Post Office*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁵ Cheng Ying-wan, p. 75 also n67.

the Korean-American treaty with the US Navy Commodore Robert Wilson Shufeldt.¹⁵⁶ In the end, though, Li raised no serious objections to the Customs Post remaining with Hart, knowing it was under the day-to-day control of Detring.

Detring's growing power and autonomy from Hart had become common knowledge far beyond China. An official in Britain's India Office, Joseph Samuel, told Campbell in August 1881 after a visit to China that 'D[etring] employed a number of agents for Li, to supply things and do work of various kinds.'¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Detring told Taylor in 1881 that 'he does everything for Li [Hongzhang] through agents, who get their 5% and save all bother about getting authority from the I. G. and so on'.¹⁵⁸ Hart was at first both calm and philosophical about Detring's growing influence with Li Hongzhang, concluding 'he certainly got on well with *Li*, who both liked him personally and made much of him as a German... I doubt though if he is principal to the extent that he thinks. *Li*'s disappearance would be a loss to him, but I don't think it would affect the Customs.'¹⁵⁹

By the 1880s, Hart began to fear he would lose his job to Detring. In 1883, Hart went so far as to warn Campbell to try to get along with Detring as a likely successor to Hart, instructing Campbell to 'make friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness'.¹⁶⁰ In 1885, Hart was offered the post of British representative in Beijing, even submitting his resignation from the Customs, but he withdrew it when he realised he would not be able to prevent Gustav Detring's appointment as his successor.¹⁶¹ Hart was uncertain whose interests Detring was advancing, wondering in 1884 'is *D.* Playing Bismarck's game... or France's (he is from Aix-la-Chapelle)... or China's to avert war at any price, or his own to spill Tseng [Zeng Guofan] - or is it his love for intrigue and diplomacy only?'.¹⁶² Samuel observed already in 1881 that 'the German influence was so great in China, there would be little coming to this Country [Britain]'.¹⁶³ Detring's approach to Chinese reform won him more commercial than diplomatic allies in Germany, however, and the German government was not keen for him to succeed Hart, considering Detring a better friend to China than to Germany.¹⁶⁴

From Customs Post to Imperial Post

The stamps, like the early Customs Post itself, had only limited initial success. Only a few thousand of each of the three denominations were purchased during the first year of issue.¹⁶⁵ The early Customs Post had some vocal critics, particularly among those who wanted to preserve the patchwork of commercial, municipal and foreign national postal services operating in China in the later nineteenth century. The advance of the Qing state into postal services was regarded with mistrust by foreigners and Chinese alike. Most Chinese simply declined to use the service, with the foreign population a much better predictor of the demand for the Customs Post in a particular port than the population as a whole.¹⁶⁶ That had advantages from Hart's perspective; Li Hongzhang reported to the Yamen that, just as Li had intended, Hart's scheme had not undermined the *I-zhan* or the *xinju*.¹⁶⁷ Foreigners were also sceptical of the Customs Post, often entrusting their mail to the free, though somewhat unreliable service offered between treaty ports by the steamer companies. The Japanese Minister complained about 'high postage rates' and 'inefficiency. Li Hongzhang considered the

¹⁵⁶ Hart to Campbell, 26 Aug. 1881, no. 337 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 382.

¹⁵⁷ Campbell to Hart, 26 Aug. 1881, no. 854 [Z/164] in Chen and Han, vol. I, pp 667–8.

¹⁵⁸ Campbell, p. 92.

¹⁵⁹ Hart to Campbell, 24 July 1883, no. 427 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 477.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 477–478.

¹⁶¹ Morse, vol. III, p. 407; also vol. II, pp. 368–372.

¹⁶² Hart to Campbell, 27 Apr. 1884, no. 477 in Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson, vol. I, p. 541.

¹⁶³ Campbell to Hart, 26 Aug. 1881, no. 854 [Z/164] in Chen and Han, vol. I, pp 667–8.

¹⁶⁴ Morse, vol. II, p.372.

¹⁶⁵ 'Appendix A: Note on the Postage Stamps of China', in *Report on the Chinese Post Office: For the Tenth Year of Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921)* (Shanghai: Supply Dept. of the Directorate General of Posts, 1922), pp. 98–104 (p. 98).

¹⁶⁶ Cheng Ying-wan, p. 77.

¹⁶⁷ Li Hongzhang, juan 8, f. 18.

Japanese charges unfounded attempts to discourage the dissolution of the foreign postal agencies'.¹⁶⁸ The Japanese minister might have been quoting from the *North China Herald*, which was scathing in its condemnation of the Customs Post. The *North China Herald* in March 1879 sniped that 'everyone sympathises with our enterprising Commissioner [Detring] for his endeavours to civilize China by a dose of progress, and for having met with such a cold shoulder from his "friends" [i.e. Chinese officials]' but that did not stop the *Herald* concluding that 'there is not much wisdom in the action of those who have risked valuable official and commercial correspondence by committing it to irresponsible persons [i.e. the Customs Post]'.¹⁶⁹ Campbell derived some satisfaction from Detring's discomfiture, telling another Customs official, William Cartwright, that

from the accounts in the newspapers, the postal experiment seems to have been a failure. It is a pity to commence a service of that kind before the arrangements have been properly matured.¹⁷⁰

One supporter of the Customs Post was the Universal Postal Union, the body founded in 1874 which coordinated international postal agreements.¹⁷¹ As Kirkhope boasted, 'it says much for the success of the youthful Service... that, in 1878.... China was formally invited to join the International Postal Union'.¹⁷² Stamps were customary for Postal Union membership since one of the Union's principles was mutual recognition and free carriage of other members' properly stamped mail.¹⁷³ Where stamps were not present, postal services were expected to write a note explaining the value paid and hand-stamping the item accordingly.¹⁷⁴ The invitation from the Postal Union reflects not 'success' in the sense of mail volumes or even popularity among customers, but rather that Hart had succeeded in structuring a service which, from the vantage point of Berne in Switzerland, looked the way a postal service was supposed to look, embodying the approach developed in Britain and other Western countries, and mandated by the Postal Union. Hart declined the invitation, on the basis that it could not claim to be China's national postal service while the *I-zhan*, *minchu* and foreign postal services were all still in operation.¹⁷⁵

Despite its early difficulties, the Customs Post became well established by the 1880s, and the potential revenue from a national postal service was increasingly attractive to the government by the end of the century. On 20 March 1896, the Customs postal service became the Imperial Post, still under the Inspector-General of Maritime Customs, but without Detring, who was by then more focused on advising Li Hongzhang, and on mining and railways.¹⁷⁶ Hart remained in 1896 as careful in his approach to postal expansion as he had ever been. Hart's cautious excitement about the Imperial Post is preserved in a jaunty epistolary poem he wrote on 25 January 1897 to Henry Kopsch, the new Postal Secretary. Hart cautioned, 'I fear, the more you hurry, the more will be our worry, and I think the postal business ought not to go too fast: what now concerns us most is just the Chinese coast - what's foreign will come easier, taken last. First, get rid of all disorder inside our proper border.'¹⁷⁷ With Li Hongzhang's warnings of twenty years earlier perhaps still ringing in his ears, he told the staff of the new service that it was important not to 'hurt deserving people's livelihoods by

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *North China Herald*, 28 Mar. 1879, p. 303. The English-language *NCH* was supportive of the Shanghai Local Post, while the British-owned, Chinese-language *Shenbao* took a more positive view of the Customs venture as an example of Sino-foreign cooperation.

¹⁷⁰ Campbell, p. 92.

¹⁷¹ Universal Postal Union, *Treaty Concerning the Formation of a General Postal Union Signed at Berne, October 9, 1874*. (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1875).

¹⁷² Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', p. 7. The General Postal Union became the Universal Postal Union in 1878. Most China postal sources refer to this body as the 'International Postal Union'.

¹⁷³ The UPU eventually granted China the right to impose charges on recipients of certain international mail in view of 'the high cost of transmission over-land - courir [sic] lines to a total distance of 60000 km must still be kept up'. See 'Foreign Postal Offices in China', trans. by C.T.D. Neil, 1912, sec. §8 III.d, QUBSC, MS 19/14.

¹⁷⁴ Universal Postal Union, pp. 22–23.

¹⁷⁵ Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', p. 7. See also Lane Jeremy Harris, pp. 118–19. China finally became a full member of the Postal Union only in 1914 Chu, p. 21n.

¹⁷⁶ Hart, 'Chinese Imperial Post: Inaugurated by Imperial Decree [Circular No. 706, Second Series], 9th April 1896', vol. II, p. 42.

¹⁷⁷ Morse, vol. III, pp. 63–64n10.

unnecessary interference with existing institutions or embarrass and occasion difficulties for officials and governments'.¹⁷⁸ The Chinese Post Office became independent of the Customs in 1911, only three years after Hart's departure from China.¹⁷⁹

Conclusion

The issue of the first Customs postage stamp emerged from two questions of authority: of Hart's (and Detring's) authority within the Maritime Customs, supported by Chinese and foreign patrons; and of the authority of the Customs Post (and the Qing state itself) to represent China, in the context of mounting foreign pressure. The first Customs stamp was produced under very different circumstances from those envisaged by Hart and Campbell. It was not designed by a foreign expert, or in line with what Westerners considered proper practice. Hart did not even approve the design. Detring's impatience led him to approach the postal experiment in a riskier fashion than Hart would have preferred. Though Detring exceeded his authority in issuing them, he had captured some of what Hart wanted to achieve in a stamp, and the 1878 Large Dragon design, showing an imperial dragon among clouds, was reissued essentially unchanged for seven years. The Small Dragon set issued in 1885 retained much of the design of the 1878 issue; only the 1894 Jubilee set for Empress Cixi's sixtieth birthday was substantially different, incorporating the longevity character often associated with Cixi.¹⁸⁰ The Large Dragon conformed to Universal Postal Union requirements which, notably, the De La Rue design had not.¹⁸¹ Just as importantly, the Large Dragon asserted the authority of the Qing state on every envelope that bore it, and reappropriated the imperial symbol from the Shanghai International Settlement.

As we have seen, Hart was not always able to insert China into global infrastructural networks as he wished. Whereas he had a relatively free hand in certain areas, such as lighthouses, in many others Hart was constrained by diverse pressures, both Chinese and foreign, pulling in multiple directions. Historians of imperialism once noted the potential influence of the 'man on the spot': an individual making apparently minor decisions with significant, sometimes unintended consequences for subsequent imperial policy.¹⁸² Individuals responsible for infrastructure, communications and so forth could exercise similarly outsize importance on the global networks which emerged, and who benefited from them. The history of both the Customs and Imperial Posts underscores both the extent and the limits of Hart's influence. Though Hart has often been presented as an agent of British interests within the Chinese government, even British officials (not to mention Chinese and other foreigners) were at times wary of concentrating too much power in Hart's hands.

Both the stamp's design and the circumstances of its production illustrate the emerging gulf between Hart and Detring, mirroring an emerging disagreement between Hart and Li Hongzhang over how China should be changed. For Hart, China would earn the respect of foreign powers by looking like a Western state, commissioning its stamps from British 'experts' (even if those experts sometimes made mistakes about the West's own rules), and not opening a postal service until it had the stamps to look the part. Detring's priorities were already in the 1870s more practical and urgent, focused less on global perceptions and more on infrastructure and engineering, and Detring drew his influence at least as much from Li Hongzhang as from Germany. The Large Dragon stamps materialised the

¹⁷⁸ Hart, 'Chinese Imperial Post: Inaugurated by Imperial Decree [Circular No. 706, Second Series], 9th April 1896', p. 42.

¹⁷⁹ Kirkhope, 'The Chinese Post Office', pp. 9–10.

¹⁸⁰ Fan Shi, p. 10ff. David Hogge, 'Piety and Power: The Theatrical Images of Empress Dowager Cixi', *The Trans-Asia Photography Review*, 2.1 (2011); Hart put considerable effort into the Jubilee stamps, though their optimistic tone was soured by the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War. See Cheng Ying-wan, p. 75, esp n65 and 66; Fan Shi, p. 11.

¹⁸¹ Ireland, p. 16.

¹⁸² Robin Winks, *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: Trends, Interpretations and Resources* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1966), p. 13.

Customs' complex relationship to the Chinese national interest: the stamps asserted Chinese sovereignty, while simultaneously facilitating the global connections which were destabilising the Chinese state.